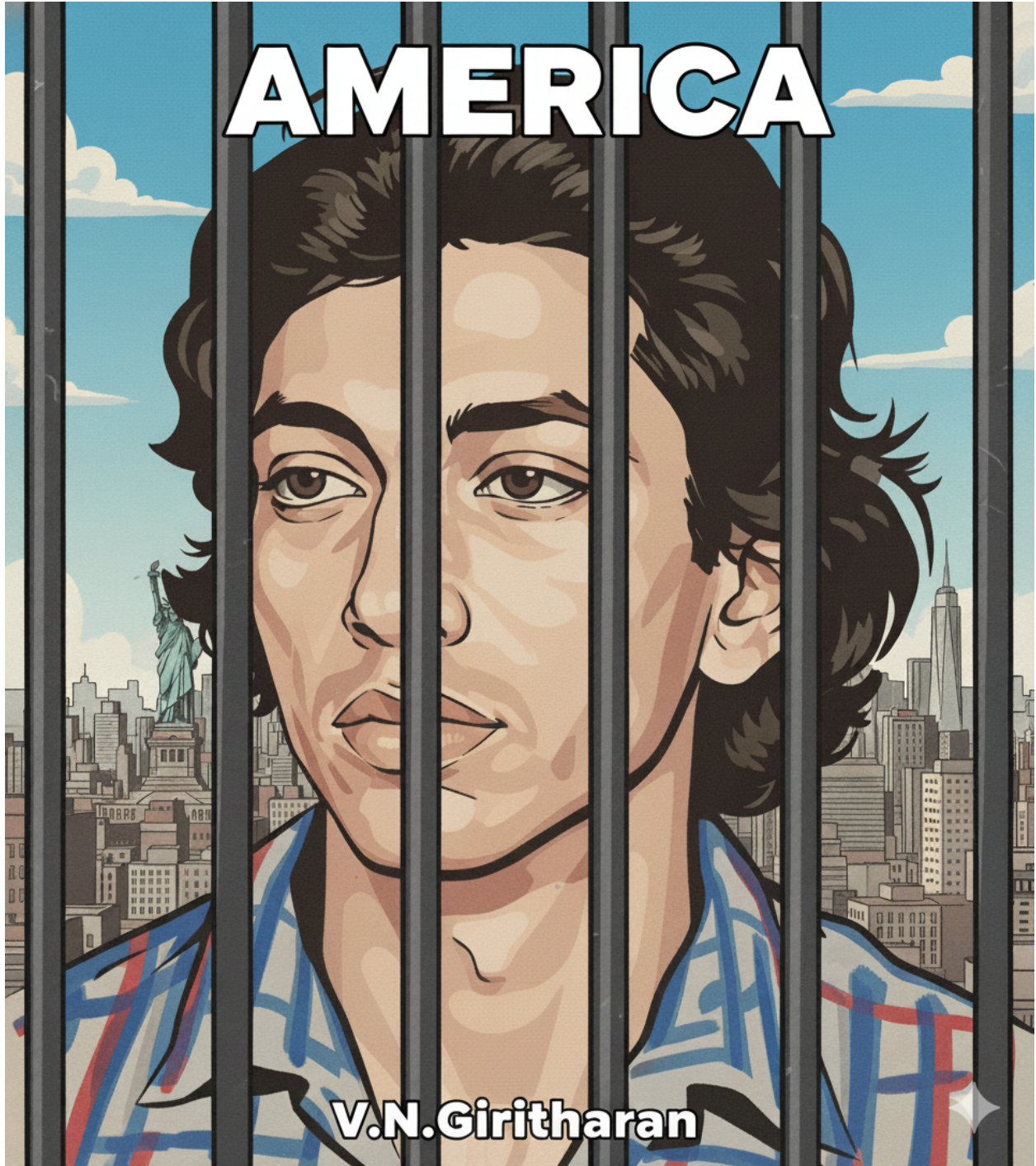


AMERICA



V.N.Giritharan

Novella: America

V.N.Giritharan

English Translation By: Latha Ramakrishnan; Edited By Thamayanthi
Giritharan



'Sharing knowledge with everyone'

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Table fo Contents

Chapter 1.	5
Chapter 2	7
Chapter 3	8
Chapter 4	10
Chapter 5	12
Chapter 6	13

"America," a revised edition of V.N. Giritharan's novel. Its first edition was published by Sneha/Mangai Publishers (1996). The revised second edition was published by Magudam (Sri Lanka) Publishers (2019). It was originally serialized in Thayaham (Canada) magazine. It is currently being released as a Kindle e-book. This novel recounts the experiences of a Sri Lankan Tamil refugee in an American detention camp. It is based on the author's personal experiences, making it significant.

Chapter 1.

This narrative unfolds in a corner of Brooklyn, situated on the fifth floor of a building whose total number of floors remains unknown to me. My perception of this fifth floor represents a distinctive realm within America. Amidst the allure of fashionable hairdos and fragrant flowers lies an underbelly riddled with lice, an analogy for my American journey.

America, touted as the pinnacle of democracy and affluence, initially stood as a beacon of human rights until my first-hand encounter contradicted this ideal. I often pondered whether my American experience was an aberration, juxtaposed against the successful lives led by fellow Americans of my background.

The American society seemingly offers boundless opportunities for financial gain, yet the same society was the stage for the unsettling encounters I faced. The Statue of Liberty symbolizes justice, freedom, and equality, while the Constitution emphasizes fundamental rights. However, the reality I encountered was quite different, akin to a verdant pasture on one side and the harsh truth on the other—idealism prevails until one steps foot inside.

As I pen these words, I am a young and aspiring writer, earnestly striving to carve a niche in the world of literature, while also identifying as a Tamil Canadian. Reflecting on my experiences in America, especially the three months spent in Brooklyn's Detention Camp and the subsequent year in New York City, has offered profound insights into life's truths. Despite the bitterness of these encounters, the lessons gleaned are invaluable. I dedicate these experiences to all those languishing in various American detention camps, yearning for freedom and release.

Ah, even my name slipped my mind momentarily—Ilango, a name bestowed upon me by my father, an ardent lover of the epic Silapadhikaram. Perhaps it is this literary significance embedded in my name that nurtured my inclination toward creative writing.

High above, the plane glides smoothly, evoking a dreamlike sensation. In just four hours, it will touch down in Boston. Events unfolded rapidly, triggered by the tragic news of thirteen army men shot dead in Thinaiveli, plunging the entire country into chaotic violence and riots. Despite fifty government-owned cars parked where I worked as an engineer, none extended aid.

Eventually, I managed to escape with another UNDP engineer to Ramakrishna Hall in Wellavathai, only to find ourselves besieged by hoodlums. Around fifty individuals sought refuge in the hall, with some hiding beneath the water tank and others behind the terrace pillars. Foreign tourists captured our frantic efforts to hide from the Brighton Hotel across the street. Displaced families from Vellavathai ran along the railway tracks toward Thengivali, as thick smoke billowed from the area. Witnessing elderly Tamil women running, their saris lifted to knee level, was a poignant but helpless sight.

Hoodlums set fire to a Colombo bus on the hall's lawns, shattering all ground floor doors and windows before the police intervened as they attempted to ignite the building.

We remained holed up in the hall for an extended period, sustaining ourselves with meager provisions and cooking. Eventually, we departed in lorries, arriving at Saraswathi Hall. Women wept as they boarded the vehicles, unaware of the destination. We spent about three weeks as refugees at Saraswathi Hall until our departure to Colombo aboard the vessel named Chidhambaram.

As we sailed, the notion of leaving the country hadn't crossed my mind. However, my parents, amidst escalating war and bloodshed, felt it prudent for me to seek refuge elsewhere. It was then that news of the possibility to proceed to Canada as a refugee surfaced. With financial assistance from my aunt, I hastily embarked on the journey. From Katunayake to Paris, then Boston via T.W.A., surmounting initial obstacles. In Paris, objections arose concerning entry to Canada without a visa, but after clarifying my status as a citizen of a Commonwealth country, they relented. The next hurdle awaited in Boston. Success there would pave the way directly to Canada, where hope persisted that refugees would find sanctuary without further obstacles.

Chapter 2

"What's on your mind, Ilango? You seem lost in thought," Arulraja asked. He was an accountant, like me, also heading to Canada as a refugee. Recent riots had unsettled him greatly, witnessing the rape of his co-worker, a Tamil girl, by heartless assailants.

"I was just contemplating the reception awaiting us wherever we go," I replied.

"It seems there won't be many problems, but there are five of us from our homeland on this flight," Arulraja said.

"True, that might pose a problem, but I feel everything will be okay," I responded. As we conversed, our plane descended for a safe landing at Logan International Airport. Five of us had arrived together, raising suspicion among airport officials. Despite affixing transit visa stamps on our tickets, Delta Airline officials withheld them, keeping us under police surveillance. Hours passed by; hunger gnawed at our stomachs, and fatigue marred our countenances. Rajasundaram, a bank manager leaving his family behind, and Sivakumar, a balding Maharaja employee, were among us. Ravindran, a teenager from Ratmalana Hindu College, completed our group. An immigration official informed us of our return to Colombo via Swiss Air Flight by 10 pm. Anxiety surged; we had mortgaged houses and purchased tickets and visas with borrowed money. The prospect of being sent back was daunting.

Rajasundaram declared, "They're forcing us to go back. We must protest!" Another immigration officer reappeared, and hunger got the better of Sivakumar, who requested permission to buy food. The official sarcastically brushed off his request. Frustration simmered, but we remained quiet as the official issued boarding passes, met with our silence, and left in annoyance. A female immigration officer arrived, offering hope. We explained our situation and country's plight, to which she listened attentively.

"We've left our homeland, facing numerous hardships, seeking refuge in Canada without requiring visas. We're puzzled why Delta Airlines refuses our tickets," Rajasundaram explained.

"Legally, it's wrong, but we're powerless. Canada ordered them to pay fines for allowing three Sri Lankan Tamils entry," the officer replied. Rajasundaram suggested claiming refugee status in America. Her expression shifted, as did the other officer's demeanor.

Returning swiftly, the female officer said, "Since you've applied for refugee status, they won't send you back. Are you all happy?" We nodded, grateful for Rajasundaram's intervention.

Chapter 3

The adage "Even after the rain stops, the drizzle continues" perfectly encapsulated our situation. We stayed at the Hilton hotel for two days, making headlines in Boston Globe and featuring our photos. Our story gained prominence in international media due to the ongoing Ethnic Violence in Sri Lanka, which sparked our journey. This coverage prompted our transfer to New York City. Little did we know we were headed to a detention camp.

Arriving in New York via a special bus, the joy of the Hilton stay lingered. The prospect of visiting this renowned city had filled us with dreams. However, one question continued to gnaw at me: why were we sent from Boston to New York? Boston's influential Tamil forums could have caused political complications for the American government, leading to our transfer.

The bus journey from Boston to New York proved pleasant, our first experience on an expressway. The sight of various trucks linked with trailers amazed us. The predominant thought throughout the trip was relief at overcoming hurdles, floating in a state of bliss.

Nostalgic memories of home filled my thoughts. I planned to resolve household issues, bring my brother here, and arrange my elder sister's marriage before focusing on Gowsalya's situation. Despite explaining my responsibilities, Gowsalya remained resolute in waiting for me, leaving me uncertain about the future.

As our bus traversed a poverty-stricken part of New York, a sense of unease set in. Observing black children playing amid dilapidated buildings heightened our disquiet. Eventually, we reached an old structure and were directed to the fifth floor, where we started comprehending our fate: a prison-like setting awaited.

Iron-barred eyes and uniformed men made us realize our predicament. Security guards supervised as our belongings and money were confiscated. We underwent fingerprinting and received prison attire. The experience felt like going "from the frying pan into the fire," as Rajasundaram aptly put it.

Behind closed prison doors, we encountered imposing security officials. The corridors resembled a hall in their own right. Recreational areas featured TVs, vending machines, and tables for games. Bunk beds in dorms mimicked a hostel setup, while strong iron doors lined the corridors. Amenities included bathrooms, a dining hall, exercise facilities, and medical care.

In our male wing, we eagerly anticipated glimpses of the women's section during meal times, competing for kitchen duty that paid a dollar a day.

Chapter 4

Our story made headlines, prominently featured in Boston Globe, Voice of America, BBC, and other channels. Our journey coincided with Sri Lanka's ethnic violence, drawing widespread media attention. After inquiries, we were sent to New York City, unaware we were bound for a detention camp.

Driving through poverty-stricken New York neighborhoods, a sense of foreboding grew. Arriving at an old structure's fifth floor, we realized the situation. The reception area resembled a prison, manned by guards. Our belongings and money were confiscated; we underwent preliminary tests, received prison attire, and felt trapped in our circumstances.

In the detention camp, about 200 men, predominantly from Africa and South America, endured similar plights. Afghans comprised the majority, while we five were the only Sri Lankans. The detainees faced varying situations, from immigration issues to illegal activities. Afghans, enduring appalling conditions for years, revealed the dark side of America's purported freedom.

Meeting fellow detainees, particularly Abdullah from Afghanistan, Daniel from El Salvador, and Der from Guatemala, we shared our stories. They lamented American interference in their countries, echoing dissatisfaction and longing for freedom. Rajasundaram felt distraught, regretting his investment in a future here.

"One must fight despair. Let's devise an escape," Sivakumar suggested. Rajasundaram considered reaching out to the Boston Tamil Association but realized we lacked their contact information.

Ravindran offered, "I know people in New York. We could seek help from them!" After discussing options, we retired for the night. A month passed in the camp, familiarizing us with its routines.

Meals were provided three times a day, though we felt hungry at night. Women prisoners ate first, followed by us. Despite their restrictive rules, the food was nutritious. Guards periodically conducted headcounts, causing unease if anyone was missing.

The prison authorities, aiming to bring some happiness into our lives, informed us one day that once a week, if we desired, we could play inside the playground enclosed by a thorny fence on all four sides. The playground was a part of our Detention Camp building. Eager to catch a glimpse of the outer world, we agreed to it wholeheartedly.

The routine of being taken to that playground provided great amusement. They would handcuff us in pairs, with many guards both in front and behind us, and then take us there. Once there,

they would provide us with a ball. As we happily played, kicking the ball with our feet or tossing it to one another, catching it, and clapping our hands in excitement, the guards would suddenly intervene, handcuff us once again, and lead us back to our place. The way they cherished and upheld the spirit of freedom and individual rights in such a strange manner amused us at times, but it also angered us greatly.

The way they treated us as some kind of "dreaded international terrorists" made us wonder whether they truly feared us. Abdulla's response partially dispelled our suspicion. "Handcuffing us and keeping us in prison serves the sole purpose of weakening us psychologically. Unable to bear this, some would voluntarily come forward and request deportation. Mohammed, who came from my country, did exactly that. But no one knows his condition today." At the same time, concerning Afghanistan, America is providing assistance to the Mujahidheen Guerrilla Force opposing the Soviet-friendly Government. However, it turns a blind eye to the plight of people like Abdulla, who seek solace here due to the unbearable conditions in their homeland.

Could it be because they suspect that Afghan spies are gaining entry under the guise of refugees?

Chapter 5

Though we resolved within ourselves to treat each day as new and focus on the silver lining, forgetting our caged conditions wasn't easy. How long could one sit in front of the idiot box (or television, as some may call it)? How long could one continue playing table tennis or doing physical exercises? Prison is prison; your freedom is entirely curbed. The burden of life weighed us down sporadically. During those moments, lying in our beds, we'd feel gloomy and incredibly fatigued.

In the detention camp, we had an advantage unimaginable in the outside world—we could contact anyone worldwide, albeit through illegal means. Credit card numbers for phones of large companies and affluent individuals somehow reached detainees regularly. How this happened remains a mystery. Rumors suggested the involvement of a West-Indian telephone operator's girlfriend, but I can't confirm the accuracy.

The instruments in some remote parts of the world linked to these numbers would suddenly stop working, only to be replaced by new numbers. Despite losing old connections and gaining new ones, we persisted in our telephonic conversations, clinging to hope. The unlawfulness of this act paled against the psychological pain of our prison lives.

The initial concern and empathy shown by the Tamil Association dwindled as days passed. Some associates from New York never found time to visit us, except for one or two kind souls.

One day, prison officials announced a visitor for us. The news bewildered us—visitors for us? Who could it be? A man of short stature with a soft, kind voice arrived—Father Abraham from Tamilnadu, now working in a New York church. He had learned about us through newspapers and brought magazines and newspapers for us to read. Only two of us could meet visitors simultaneously, separated by a wire partition. Rajasundharam and I met him. His visit during our distressed and unsettled state brought solace to our battered souls. "Is there anything I can do? Please let me know," said Father Abraham. Our primary concern was finding a way out of that place as soon as possible.

Rajasundhram, greatly shaken, immediately responded, "Father, I left behind my wife and children in our homeland. These people make us feel like we're bound to live here forever! If you can help us escape this hell, we'd be eternally grateful."

With a reassuring voice, Father Abraham said, "Don't worry. I know a lawyer working in a Christian society. I'll inquire. Please call me for anything you wish to discuss. I'll do what I can." Our meeting with Father Abraham revived our dormant hopes. It felt like finding something to cling to amidst a drowning sea.

Chapter 6

Time passed, new detainees arrived, and some left. Some were deported, while others were released on bail. However, it seemed we couldn't leave until our case concluded.

Meanwhile, Daniel found a new spark in his life. While working in the kitchen, he developed affection for a fellow prisoner from his country. His youthful demeanor slowly faded. Additionally, a Nigerian youth, awaiting extradition, exhibited signs of distress one night, speculated to be possession or a breakdown due to shattered dreams. An African detainee in our camp attempted to drive away the perceived evil spirit, a spectacle that captivated us all night. The guards surprisingly didn't intervene.

By morning, the young man regained normalcy. Another noteworthy event unfolded during nightly headcounts—a stern, spectacled officer conducted checks, resembling characters from war movies. His presence made the prisoners smile and occasionally indulge in mischief, tricking him during headcounts, much to everyone's amusement.

Our detention life wasn't devoid of interesting moments or incidents. Life carried on. Father Abraham, our constant source of solace, continuously reassured us, "Don't worry about anything."

Later, Vijayabaskaran's arrival changed our fate. He, too, was caught on his way to Canada, like us. Excited by his lawyer's news, he informed us of the possibility of bail. This sparked hope among us, prompting Rajasundhram to feel restless, sensing something amiss in our case. We collectively decided to contact Vijayabaskaran's lawyer to understand the discrepancies.

Vijayabaskaran spoke to his lawyer on our behalf through his uncle, sharing our decision to have him represent us too. That night, a solution emerged. Vijayabaskaran's uncle informed Father Abraham, who relayed the news to us over the phone. Through this call, our Boston lawyer discovered the missteps in our case. Following immediate action by our lawyers, bail could be arranged within a week. This call reinvigorated us, instilling a sense of euphoria and relief.

Our detention finally came to an end. For about three months, we were stripped of our rights—a haunting experience. Our association with various people from around the world was enriching, yet leaving good souls like Daniel, Richard, Romeo, and Abdhulla behind saddened us. They, admitted illegally, remained in limbo until their case's resolution — hoping for a chance at a future.

Epilogue:

Following the July riots of 1983, when I left for Canada, nineteen other Tamilians traveled with me on the same plane. Due to Delta Airlines' refusal to take us to Montreal, we were forced to seek political asylum in America. Our experiences form the basis of this novella—a mixture of 95% real incidents and 5% imagination to portray real events accurately. Names and identities have been altered for privacy. The events, rules, and routines in the Detention Camp are factual. The changes in American refugee laws, if any, remain unknown. Many Tamils continue to arrive in America, and numerous people worldwide still languish in American detention camps. This narrative is dedicated to all those enduring similar struggles.

My daughter's comments:

I admire your story! It's incredible to read about your experiences and your captivating storytelling. Your narrative opened my eyes to the treatment faced by many and surely impacted others too. I'm proud to call you my father!

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V.N. Giritharan



V.N. Giritharan is a Tamil writer from Sri Lanka, currently residing in Canada. He was educated at Vavuniya Mahavidyalayam and Jaffna Hindu College, and is a graduate in Architecture from the University of Moratuwa. He also holds a degree in Electronic Engineering from Centennial College in Toronto and has various qualifications in Information Technology. He began his writing career in Sri Lanka and has continued to write since moving abroad. He has been the editor of the online magazine 'Pathivugal' since 2000.

His works have been published in magazines and newspapers by Sri Lankan, Tamil Nadu, and diaspora Tamils. Research papers on his diaspora fiction have been presented at academic forums in Tamil Nadu. Students in Tamil Nadu universities have conducted research on his works for their doctoral and master's degrees in philosophy. Notably, his short story 'Ponthupparavaigal' (Cave Birds) has been included in a Tamil language curriculum for students by the Singapore Ministry of Education. Another work, 'America,' is part of the curriculum at American College (Tamil Nadu, India).

He has won awards in the Ananda Vikatan Platinum Jubilee competition and the global science fiction short story competition organized by the writer Sujatha Trust and Aazhi Publishers. He received the Iyal Award for Literary Achievement from the Tamil Literary Garden of Canada in 2022.